



## A DECONSTRUCTIVE ANALYSIS OF LOUIS MACNEICE'S "PRAYER BEFORE BIRTH"

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### Abstract

*The paper traces the nature and effect of the social forces that treat literature as either a document reflecting social conditions or a product of those conditions. It presents a checklist of questions that enables and ensures the readers better understanding of MacNeice's poem "Prayer Before Birth". It states clearly the aim of the analysis of the poem and introduces the concept of deconstruction and explains how it is basically a mode of interpretation. It explains the role of deconstruction in not assigning any fixed but multiple layers of meanings to a literary text which is taken for analysis. It also makes the reader aware of a technique called 'anthropomorphizing' which the poet has employed in the poem in order to attribute human qualities to animals and vice a versa. By planting the poem in social context, the paper draws conclusion and provides a list of technical words used in the paper.*

**Keywords:** *anthropomorphizing, binary oppositions, deconstruction, différer, and logocentrism.*

### Introduction

Apart from the socio-political importance of its theme, it is essential to understand the influence of society on literature and the influence of literature on society. The established interpretation of the poem "Prayer Before Birth" from sociological perspective aims at examining the expressions used by the poet for specific purposes and brings out the theme. The crux of the deconstructive analysis of the poem is that the poem implies the meaning beyond its established interpretations. Deconstruction is employed as a mode of interpretation in analyzing and interpreting the poem beyond the established meaning.



### **The Mutual Influence of Society and Literature**

Society and literature influence each other and literature often reflects the rules, values and cultural ethos of a particular society from which it originates. Louis MacNeice's "Prayer before Birth" was written in 1944 in the context of bombing of London during the Second World War. This is the social and historical context of the poem, and the literary and cultural context of the poem can be understood by the following words of Louis MacNeice: "The writer today should be not so much the mouthpiece of a community (for then he will only tell it what it knows already) but as its conscience, its critical faculty, its generous instinct" (Kristian Smidt 240).

### **A Checklist of Questions That Ensures a Better Understanding of the Poem**

- a. What social forces and institutions are portrayed in the poem?
- b. How are these forces portrayed?
- c. What is the poet's attitude towards them?
- d. What are the various elements of the society that appear in the poem?
- e. How important are they in determining or influencing the life of the character portrayed?
- f. What are the other issues that appear in the course of the poem?
- g. How important are the social factors that try to influence the behaviour of the character delineated?
- h. To what extent is the life of the character influenced or determined by the forces of the society?
- i. To what extent is the character aware of these forces?
- j. What is the stance taken by the character in combating these forces?

### **The Analysis of the Poem**

What does the analysis of the poem aim at? Sociological analysis of the poem aims at examining the expressions used by the poet for specific purposes.

### **The Established Interpretation of the Poem**

"Prayer Before Birth" is written from the perspective of the archetypal symbol of an unborn child's prayer for a better world—a world of justice and social equality instead of a world of cruel exploitation, horror, violence, totalitarianism and marginalization. It is a re-subjective stage of the social being from which the child cries for individuality and wants to negate all forces of socio-political conformism, imposition and ideological brainwashing.

There is a political plea, which comes from the child when it begs for pure nature—the grass, the trees and the water. The child insists that the murders, the crimes and all the sins, which he may commit, will not be his, rather it is the society, which is going to commit them through



him. His is a plea against the mechanization of the human subject, turning him into a mere cog. He does not want to become a stone. It is better that he gets killed before birth itself.

An analysis of the poem raises the following questions in the mind of the reader. They are: How does the society unleash its impact on the character delineated in the poem? How does the character depicted in the poem assess the persons of different cultural background?

- a. Louis MacNeice by referring to "...the bloodsucking bat or the rat or the stoat or the/ club-footed ghoul come near me" (Green 200) tries to signify and refer to gruesome persons who are in human shape but have the habits and tastes of animals.
- b. The poet realistically describes how the unborn child fearfully anticipates the fate that awaits it: "... the human race may with tall walls wall me,/ with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me,/ on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me" (200 ).
- c. In order to protect itself from these social evils, the unborn child seeks the help of wisdom "...a white light/ in the back of my mind to guide me" (200).
- d. The innocence of the unborn child would be ephemeral by nature. Once born into this world, the child will be forced to cultivate bad habits, speak vulgar words, engender evil thoughts, and will be held responsible for the following deeds:

"For the sins that in me the world shall commit, my words  
when they speak me, my thoughts when they think me,  
my treason engendered by traitors beyond me,  
my life when they murder by means of my  
hands, my death when they live me". (200)

- e. The poet points out the blunder the society commits in dividing the humankind into the beast and the angel, the two extremes. But the golden means the poet proposes to the humankind is to be neither divine nor beastly, but a normal human being: "Let not the man who is beast or who thinks he is God/ come near me" (200).
- f. The poignant plea of the unborn child is to save itself from being transformed into a mere machine devoid of feelings. The unborn child also prays for strength to fight against all the forces that will try to make its life a meaningless, feelingless part of the system of the society, bereft of all human and finer feelings. These ideas get echoed in the following lines:



“... ; O fill me

With strength against those who would freeze my

humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal automaton,

would make me a cog in a machine, a thing with

one face, a thing, and against all those

who would dissipate my entirety, would

blow me like thistledown hither and

thither or hither and thither

like water held in the

hands would spill me”. (201)

- g. The unborn child decides what it should aspire for and what it should fight against. It also suggests the alternative to be carried out as follows: “Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me. / Otherwise kill me” (201).

### **A Deconstructive analysis of the Poem**

Deconstruction is basically a mode of interpretation. “Deconstruction, as applied in the criticism of literature, designates a theory and practice of reading which questions and claims to “subvert” or “undermine” the assumption that the system of language provides grounds that are adequate to establish the boundaries, the coherence or unity, and the determinate meanings of a literary text” (Abrams 55).

Deconstruction grew out of the linguistic principles of De Saussure who noted that languages create meaning by binary opposites. Verbal oppositions such as *light/dark, male/female, rise/fall, up/down, high/low, black/white, beautiful/ugly, good/evil, heaven/hell, etc.*, show a human tendency, which is transculturally common, create vocabulary as pairs of opposites, and attribute arbitrarily to one of the two words positive connotation and the other word negative connotation.

Deconstructionists carry this principle one step further by asserting that this tendency is endemic to all words, and hence all literature. For instance, they might try to complicate literary interpretations by revealing that “heroes” and “villains” often have overlapping traits, or else they have traits that only exist because of the presence of the other. Hence, these concepts are unreliable in themselves as a basis for talking about literature in any meaningful way.



Deconstructionists deny the *absolute* linguistic value of literature, and assert that all literature is ultimately incapable of offering a constructed meaning outside the “prison-house of language,” which always embodies oppositional ideas within itself ([https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit\\_terms\\_D.html](https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_D.html)).

Jacque Derrida’s French term *différance*, which is untranslatable in English, puns on the verb *différer* meaning “to differ” and “to defer”, which he uses as an antonym for *logocentrism* (Cuddon 246). Basically, Derrida’s starting spot is Saussure’s theory about the arbitrary nature of language (i.e., the combination of phonetic sounds that we use as a “sign” has no logical connection with the object it refers to). Derrida pushes this idea to its logical extreme, “that to differ or differentiate is also to defer, postpone or withhold [meaning]” (246). Thus, absolute meaning continuously and endlessly remains removed from the system of sign/symbol/sentence/text one uses to discuss meaning.

A deconstructionist’s perspective need not always only be contradictory but can also be complementary to the established interpretations of any work of art. So, deconstruction can be either for or against the established thoughts or beliefs. By adopting this technique, the reader can exploit the poem from its established thoughts, concepts and beliefs, and enable the readers to read, understand and render the poem in new perspectives. In other words, a reader, who is basically a deconstructionist, believes that to read is to understand and keep one’s mind aloof from the ideology, concept, belief and logical meaning explicated and propagated through the poem, and tries to give one’s own interpretation of the poem, after finding that the existing established thoughts and interpretations are inadequate and only illusory. In this context, the reader need not always try to outwit the existing accepted interpretation of the poem such as the prayer of an unborn child.

At the same time, the reader can deconstruct the poem against the conservative or traditionally established mode of thinking and understanding in order to bring out a new meaning and present the poem in a new perspective. Accordingly, the whole poem can be re-interpreted as the combination of forces that are essential for human survival. The poet externalizes the inner “selves” of the human beings which are constructed with a combination of both the animalistic and the divine qualities. In creative writing, ‘anthropomorphizing’ is a technique employed in order to attribute human qualities to animals. This can be rephrased as humanizing animal characters and bestializing human characters. Furthermore, the poet personifies the humans as animals. In “Prayer before Birth”, the poet reverses this technique to bestialize human beings. In other words, instead of attributing human qualities to animals, the poet attributes animal qualities to human being. To put it in a nutshell, the poet has depicted the dehumanized human characters in the form of animals.

The so-called “contradictory” instincts/forces that are mentioned in the poem have to be kept under control and channelized for constructing a lovable society in justice and a just society



in love. The allegory employed in the poem suggests that the unborn child has to be trained to harness the different aspects of humanity. In other words, the animalistic qualities of the people of the world and the divine/angelic qualities of the unborn child must be balanced and controlled to overcome adversity in life. Life is a journey of struggle between birth and death. It is not a question of either negating the ugly instincts of “the bloodsucking bat or the rat or the stoat or the/club-footed ghoul...” (Green 200) or accommodating the innocence/divinity of the child, but unifying both the forces, keeping them under control, and channelizing them for the construct of an ideal individual or society. These supposed “opposing” forces literally and figuratively have to co-exist. The act of balancing the animalistic instincts of humanity and the divine forces of humanity is the only plausible attempt one can make in life. Since the unborn child is not in a position to realize these facets of life, the poet wants the readers to realize these facts that the animal instincts are very much necessary for the survival of human beings and both the forces do co-exist in a human being.

### **Conclusion**

“Prayer Before Birth” points out some of the dangers and evils of the modern world and its advancing civilization. Beyond the borders of its accepted and established interpretations of its meaning, the poem is deconstructed. The reader is taught that the deconstructed meaning can be either for or against the established interpretations of the poem. It is clearly explained that by adopting this technique, the reader can exploit the poem from its established thoughts, concepts and beliefs. The readers are shown how to read, understand and render the poem in new perspectives. In other words, the readers are trained to be deconstructionists and are enabled to read, understand and keep their minds aloof from the ideology, concept, belief and logical meaning that are explicated and propagated through the poem. The readers are trained to give their own interpretation of the poem, after finding that the existing established thoughts and interpretations are inadequate and only illusory.

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